Edvard Grieg: Complete Symphonic Works Vol. I

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RECORD REVIEW

It is easy to overlook the many original features in Grieg's music, especially in his most famous works. The Piano Concerto, for example, which everyone knows, was the first in musical history to end slowly and, prior to his Peer Gynt music of 1874-75, did any composer conclude an orchestral movement with a passage for unpitched percussion , as Grieg did?

Because of the familiarity of his music, exemplified above every other factor by its melodic appeal, such innovations as these – and there are others – simply go by the board. Yet the truly intelligent conductor, perceiving these remarkable departures from the norm (and perhaps spurred by the admiration for Grieg's music evinced by the likes of Debussy – his String Quartet is based almost entirely on Grieg 's in the same key, despite his later derogatory comments – and by Bartók, Busoni and Stravinsky, whose first job for Diaghilev was to orchestrate several of Grieg's piano pieces: these have never been recorded) will pay greater attention to details in the scores than most of his confederates. The results can often appear surprising: but such details are in the music, silently awaiting rediscovery.

The Norwegian Eivind Aadland falls into the investigative category of conductors, for this new CD, boldly headed 'Complete Symphonic Works, Vol. 1', should really be heard not only by all admirers of this composer but also by his detractors, who may thereafter find their views in need of revision. Here we have the two Peer Gynt Suites and the Symphonic Dances. Exceptional among conductors of this music, Aadland is a stick er for the correct observance of repeats, with the result that the four-movement Symphonic Dances comes across virtually as the composer's second symphony (the much earlier C minor Symphony was mistakenly withdrawn by Grieg after several performances). As such, Grieg's Op. 64 displays a rise in tonality from G to A across its four movements – by no means unusual either in music of the time (1898) or in his own earlier works (the First Peer Gynt Suite follows the identical tonal progression).

Indeed, in terms of choice of tempos and of internal orchestral balance, Aadland places this music on altogether a higher artistic plane than it usually occupies, and obtains really fine playing from the West German Radio Symphony Orchestra of Cologne. This is notable music-making, and if one has a comment, rather than a criticism as such, it is that on occasion Aadland tends to anticipate changes of tempo a shade too soon, but such is the overall excellence of this performance that that is the only query one can raise: otherwise, this is a very fine performance indeed.

Much the same can be said of the two Peer Gynt Suites; I particularly admire Aadland's observance of the attacca joining the final movements of the Second Suite. I cannot recall hearing this feature so correctly conveyed as it is here.

Elsewhere, this music is played with considerable love and consideration of detail, but it is the account of the Symphonic Dances which deserves special attention.

Although this is the first volume in the series, it will not be the first integral recording of Grieg's orchestral music, for the composer's own Bergen Philharmonic has issued such a collection on BIS – the first by a Norwegian Orchestra – which is very fine indeed, under Ole Christian Ruud, and which has justly won several international awards, including that of the Grieg Society's Record of the Year more than once. The couplings are different, but this music is so good, so original, so well loved and ultimately so immortal, as to warrant new recordings by dedicated musicians, such as this outstanding new Audite CD exemplifies.

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